

The pastor is one who cares for, and is concerned for, the guidance and nurture of those who gather together as an intentional congregation of Christians.

History and Background

The early church has recorded its experience of some being appointed to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The first three were basically people who moved around from place to place. Pastors and teachers, however, were people who remained in place and frequently one person served in both roles.

Pastors represented an answer to a need of the early church. Much of the story of Jesus and the growing body of church teachings were passed along by word of mouth. Converts who sought to mature as believers needed to relate to someone who was prepared to be helpful on an ongoing basis. The church responded by appointing resident pastors from among its number. The pastor also served as teacher to keep the church free of heresy.

The pastor is one who serves. Frequently this person has been called “the minister,” even though all believers are called to ministry in one form or another. The word **minister** means **servant**. The pastor serves the needs of the local church and its members. He or she is faith-filled and faithful. The pattern that emerged in the early church (Read 1 Peter 5) remains a driving image today. The

word **pastor** comes from a word that means **shepherd**. Today few people in the United States know shepherds who actually tend sheep, and we don't like to think of ourselves as sheep blindly led by a shepherd, so this image has some problems. There are, however, honorable and valued ideas about the shepherd function in the New Testament. The shepherd cared for the health and safety of each member of the flock and for the flock as a whole. In the pastor, then, a church has a leader who cares about the enemies that distort belief, searches out those who are lost, and works for the faith that under girds in good times and bad. Far from being a ruler or controller, the shepherd serves by caring for, guiding and nurturing faith and faithfulness.

The church values the servanthood of pastors and expects people to be prepared for the role. We seek people who exhibit the presence of God in their lives and who care about people, the church and the world. Beyond that, we look for people who know and can share the scriptures and teachings of the church. We look for people who can bring together present need with the insight accumulated over time to such things as the worship life of a church. We look for people who encourage others to use the gifts they have been given in ministry within and beyond the congregation. We look for people who are prepared to help a congregation in its theological tasks, bring clarity of belief and understanding of implications for mission. In short, we look for learned pastors, not those simply educated in

certain courses but learned in the sense of having insight gained through disciplined and ongoing preparation.

The role of the pastor has many dimensions. At times, certain roles are more apparent than others. But in some measure all are there all the time: preaching and teaching; leading worship and administering the sacraments and rites of the church; caring for people in need; overseeing the whole work of the church; working in the community, denomination and ecumenical settings. The pastor as intercessor and liturgist is responsible for making the mysteries of God more understandable, for bridging the gap between mystery and the mundane. The pastor as prophet helps form and reform the church--building the community and helping that community look critically at itself.

The work of a pastor is built on relationships. Interaction is personal and human. Pastor and people come to know each other. Names, histories, and moments of joy and sorrow are known and shared over time. Indeed, it is this interaction that bonds and builds the relationships that add strength to ongoing pastoral work.

Common Practices

When most people think of a pastor, they think of one ordained person serving one local church. But in the United Church of Christ, there are lay pastors, pastors serving more than one church, several people serving one large church or a cluster of churches

and people who have another vocation as well as pastor. People are pastors as conference or association ministers. Others provide pastoral leadership in institutions other than local churches.

There are clearly times when a pastor relates to an individual: in a pastoral call to someone sick or unable to leave home, in time spent with a committee member, in a counseling session and in a call made in the home or workplace. Pastors spend a good deal of their time with small groups, membership and confirmation classes, study groups, committees and fellowships. They do much of what they do in large groups, such as communal worship, congregational meetings and community organizations. In all these settings, they work to build the community into a coherent band of people who have the necessary support to be faithful. Pastors bring denominational and ecumenical concerns and resources to the local church. They help interpret the United Church of Christ: its history, polity and practice; Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM); the mission and resources of the conference, association and national bodies; the actions of General Synod. Pastors are aware of, and encourage participation in, ecumenical work with other churches in the community, councils of churches and national and international agencies.

Pastors work to understand the community and relate the needs found there to the ongoing mission of the local church. Frequently, they provide leadership in a particular community

issue. They attend meetings and relate to community leaders in order to sense the pulse of the community. This is done in the context of the gospel and its tradition.

Because pastors are engaged with individuals and groups in the congregation, with the community and with denominational and ecumenical groups, they can understand the whole picture. They have an overview which they are expected to develop and share with church leaders. Pastors are not always automatically right in observations growing out of their overview. But they have access to a cross section of activities, so they can test their perceptions. They can help the congregation think about practical and theological issues, balance and focus, organizational and leadership needs, pressure points and how activities fit together.

Ways to Increase Effectiveness

The pastor and those served have a shared stake in the pastor's effectiveness, and the congregation's ability to understand the pastor's role and duties. These may be helpful:

- **A pastoral relations committee.** This committee works with the pastor to affirm strengths, isolate areas for growth and clarify expectations. It can deal with the manageability of the workload, the style and substance of the pastor's ministry as related to the church's needs, provisions for continuing

education and personal and family needs.

- **Support groups.** Pastors can seek out and meet regularly with other pastors. These groups are conducive to the kind of interchange that challenges and provides caring critique.
- **Boundary workshops.** Virtually all conferences or associations in the United Church of Christ provide opportunities for pastors to meet together to reflect on the unique relationship and ethical boundary issues that professional ministry entails. Congregational leaders and pastoral relations committees may find it useful to review the workshop "A Sacred Trust", a set of videos and other materials available in most Conferences.
- **Sources of feedback.** Conference and association ministers are sources of feedback. Committees on the ministry may also provide opportunities for review and support.
- **Review the expectations of the congregation.** Sometimes members expect a pastor to be just like the last one. Occasionally pastors are not expected to participate in community and denominational activities. Such expectations can cause conflict. It's important for leaders to assess expectations and overcome unrealistic expectations.
- **Personal reflection, study and prayer.** The pastor must continually come to grips with "What does it mean for me to be faithful?" "What is it that God is seeking for me to be and do?"

- **Personal care for health, family and other relationships.** Pastors need time away from duties to renew themselves and keep perspective and health.
- **Study,** using resources available locally, from the United Church of Christ, on the web, or from seminaries or institutes. Pastor and leaders can find ways to share study. For example, the website www.congregationalresources.org has online "learning pathways" which leaders can share.
- **Completing the Circle** by David McMahill is a resource for reviewing the ministry of the congregation. Published by the Alban Institute, it's available from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.
- **The Pastoral Relations Committee** from Parish Life and Leadership is available on www.ucc.org, in the Leadership section.

Issues Facing Your Church

- Increasing numbers of churches share a pastor with other churches or have a part-time pastor with a second source of income. What changes would this require for your church's lay leadership? Could it be seen as an opportunity for creativity and growth?
- Candidates for ministry in seminaries are increasingly diverse in gender, family makeup, physical ability, racial and cultural

background, and so forth. Are local churches open to receive them? Is yours?

- Expectations are so varied and unrealistic at times that pastors cannot find the energy and time to meet them and feel burned out. What does your church do to help your pastor prevent burnout? Today society is well aware of the reality of clergy misconduct of many types. Does your congregation understand what constitutes and abuse of pastoral authority? What are ways local churches can help pastors make certain they do not overstep boundaries? Does your church have a plan to use if misconduct is alleged?

Questions

- What could happen to increase the appreciation and effectiveness of your pastor's work?
- Are pastors the only ones who provide caring, nurture and guidance? If not, why have a pastor? If so, is it realistic to expect the pastor to do it all?
- How does your pastor use her or his time?
- To what degree does pastoral overview contribute to the ongoing work of your church?

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